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CONFLICT WITH LIBYA: OPERATIONAL ART IN THE WAR ON TERRORISM

by

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A paper submitted to the Faculty of the Naval War College in partial satisfaction of the requirements of the Department of Operations.

The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views and are not necessarily endorsed by the Naval War College or the Department of the Navy.

Signature:

*David R. Arnold*

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Abstract of  
CONFLICT WITH LIBYA: OPERATIONAL ART IN THE WAR ON TERRORISM

The relevance of operational art in the low intensity conflict (LIC) environment must not be overlooked. A study of the series of U.S. military operations against Libya in 1986, and the events leading up to them, provides insights into how operational level thinking drove the military element of the long-term campaign against Qaddafi. This case study approach to the conflict examines how operational art was used in planning the operations, and the degree to which it supported achievement of strategic and operational objectives. It also addresses unique challenges faced by cognizant operational commanders in politically-dominated LIC scenarios. The paper is not a critique of actions at the tactical level, nor does it suggest alternatives to original operational plans. Rather, it asserts the overall validity of operational level thinking in the LIC environment, and concludes that the applicability of operational art in LIC should be formally recognized in relevant joint warfare publications.

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# CONFLICT WITH LIBYA: OPERATIONAL ART IN THE WAR ON TERRORISM

## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

The Problem. The applicability of operational art at the low end of the conflict spectrum is not universally accepted, despite a national military strategy which increasingly emphasizes response to regional crises and operations in the low intensity conflict (LIC) environment.<sup>1</sup> The U.S. military's peacetime contingency operations against Libya in 1986 proves the relevancy of operational level thinking in this area, and also illustrates challenges faced by operational level commanders when military force supports other instruments of national power.

This paper, through a case study of the Libyan operations, argues that operational level planning is as essential in low intensity conflict as in conventional or higher intensity warfare, although it acknowledges there are key differences--classic principles of war apply less often in LIC, and there are special principles and imperatives unique to the LIC environment. The paper does not include a critique of tactical execution of the original series of operations, nor does it attempt to present a detailed or revised plan for future actions. Rather, it concentrates on broader operational level planning and execution, and to what

extent these translated the national strategy into tangible and achievable actions. In doing so, it examines how the use of operational art in the Libyan action complemented ongoing political, diplomatic, and economic efforts, and assesses its overall effectiveness in the LIC campaign against Libya.

Chapter I reviews the origins of the conflict with Libya and the events leading up to 1986, and the second chapter examines the military campaign from an operational level perspective. The third chapter addresses the use of operational art in the operations, its applicability in LIC, and the overall outcome of the campaign. The final chapter offers conclusions concerning the long-term impact of the operations against Libya, the role operational level thinking played in the campaign, and the continuing importance of operational art in the LIC environment.

## CHAPTER .I

### LIBYA AND INTERNATIONAL TERRORISM

"We are capable of exporting terrorism to the heart of America . . . As for America, which has exported terrorism to us, we will respond likewise."

Muammar Qaddafi, June 11, 1984

#### Origins of the Conflict

In 1969 Captain Muammar Qaddafi, for years a key figure in the secret revolutionary movement in Libya, led a well organized coup against autocratic King Idris and gained control of the country with relative ease.<sup>2</sup> Qaddafi's militant new regime vowed to put an end to foreign dominance, not just in Libya but throughout the Arab world, and loudly vocalized its nonacceptance of the existence of Israel while pledging support of the Palestinian cause. Qaddafi soon forced the withdrawal of U.S. and British forces from their bases in Libya and began nationalizing foreign oil companies' operations. His coup, more than any other single event, marked the true beginning of the new Islamic radicalism, despite decades of seemingly irreversible westernization, and put Libya on a collision course with the United States.<sup>3</sup>

Oil revenue proved a windfall to the Libyan economy, providing capital to support a massive military build-up. Qaddafi's new source of economic power, and his relentless anti-Western rhetoric, enhanced his standing in the Arab

world while Europe and America watched with increasing concern. An immediate byproduct was Libya's sponsorship of a myriad of terrorist organizations, beginning in the early seventies with Arab factions combatting Israel, including the notorious Abu Nidal group. By the mid-eighties Libya's support of international terrorist groups--from training camps and safe houses to weapons and intelligence--was second only to that of Iran.<sup>4</sup>

#### Conflict with the United States

From the beginning of Qaddafi's regime, prospects for positive relations with the United States were hampered by the presence of U.S. bases and oil companies in Libya, and America's continued support of Israel.<sup>5</sup> Despite these differences, U.S. policy remained conciliatory until discovery of Libyan hands in several terrorist attacks against Americans and U.S. interests overseas. As a result, in 1973 President Nixon ordered an arms embargo of Libya. The sanctions represented the opening round in a state of low intensity conflict that has existed between the United States and Libya ever since.

The Carter administration eased sanctions, hoping this would lead to improved relations and prevent further terrorist attacks. The initiative was stymied by Carter's rigorous pursuit of a peace agreement between Egypt and Israel, and doomed by Qaddafi's strident support of Iran's



seizing of American hostages.<sup>6</sup> By 1980, evidence of Libyan hit squads pursuing Qaddafi's exiled enemies living in the United States led to the expulsion of Libyan diplomats, and the (U.S. directed) closure of the American embassy in Tripoli.

The Reagan administration ushered in an era of renewed U.S. assertiveness in the international arena. President Reagan saw Libya as an opportunity to launch a new policy of aggressively countering regimes hostile to the United States.<sup>7</sup> What would become the "Reagan Doctrine" was a reaffirmation that America must actively support allies and friends through a variety of ways and means, including security assistance and, if necessary, defend her own national security interests directly through unilateral military actions.

Reagan intensified the campaign against Libya as new evidence of Qaddafi's anti-U.S. activity emerged. In addition to aiding terrorist groups, Qaddafi was actively supporting communist insurgencies and was fomenting unrest in Chad and Sudan. Reagan first responded politically through a psychological campaign with a twofold purpose: portray Qaddafi as a "mad dog" to further isolate him from moderate Arab states, and by emphasizing Libya's terrorist activity, build public support in America for a seemingly inevitable military clash. New efforts to isolate Libya economically

and diplomatically were begun, and the ongoing arms embargo and trade sanctions were tightened. An attempt to slash Libyan oil revenue through a boycott faltered as NATO allies refused to join the ban, fearing terrorist reprisals as well as retaliatory trade sanctions.<sup>8</sup> The failure to build a coalition suggested the ongoing low intensity conflict with Libya would remain a largely American endeavor, even as Europeans continued to bear the brunt of Qaddafi's terrorist activities.

The frustrating inability to rally allies against Qaddafi forced Reagan to turn increasingly to military means. All aircraft carrier battle groups deploying to the Mediterranean began carrying contingency plans for strikes against Libya, and continuance of the series of freedom of navigation (FON) operations begun in the Gulf of Sidra in 1981 was ordered. Reagan also authorized covert action--the United States began aiding anti-Qaddafi groups inside Libya and provided security assistance to the Sudanese military.<sup>9</sup> Until early 1986 U.S. policy towards Libya would be characterized by unilateral and overt economic, diplomatic, and political hostility, complemented with covert action and maritime shows of force in the Gulf of Sidra.

#### Prelude to the Gulf of Sidra Operations

Libyan sponsorship of terrorist activity continued unabated through 1985. In justifying the attacks, Qaddafi

warned in a speech in March that the western powers would see more bloodshed if they stood in the way of Libya's "legitimate and sacred action--an entire people liquidating its opponents at home and abroad in plain daylight."<sup>10</sup>

In June a series of near simultaneous attacks were launched worldwide--from Frankfurt to El Salvador American civilians and military personnel were targeted in bombings and shootings. TV cameras rolled as a passenger on TWA flight 847 was murdered by Hezbollah gunmen and dumped on the tarmac in Beirut. The coverage galvanized the will of the American people to strike back, and the National Command Authority (NCA) decided to shift U.S. military strategy from mere shows of force, to plans for both retaliatory and preemptive strikes in response to Libyan-directed terrorism.<sup>11</sup> The fortuitous intercept of the Achille Lauro terrorists by U.S. Navy fighters in October buoyed confidence in the military's ability to counter terrorism, and strengthened Reagan's resolve to fight back.

Violent 1985 ended with the hijacking of an Egypt air flight to Malta in which Israeli and American passengers were singled out for execution, and the brutal holiday massacres of travelers at the Rome and Vienna airports. All three of the attacks were carried out by the Abu Nidal group with the usual Libyan logistical support.<sup>12</sup> Qaddafi publicly praised the slayings, calling the actions "heroic."<sup>13</sup>

### CHAPTER III

#### U.S. MILITARY OPERATIONS AGAINST LIBYA, JAN-APR 1986

"By providing material support to terrorist groups which attack U.S. citizens, Libya has engaged in armed aggression against the United States under established principles of international law . . ."

Ronald Reagan, January 7, 1986

#### National Objectives

In wake of the Rome and Vienna bombings, President Reagan decided the national security objective of protecting American citizens and interests from terrorism could no longer be accomplished through non-military ways and means alone.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, his public statements citing "armed aggression" by Libya against the United States suggested that a new threshold in the conflict had been reached. The JCS Chairman recommended conducting a major maritime operation designed to show American resolve. The plan would include contingencies for conducting retaliatory strikes into Libya, dependent upon Qaddafi's response either militarily or through terrorism. Both the U.S. Sixth Fleet (COMSIXTHFLT) and U.S. Air Forces, Europe (USAFE) staffs had been drafting new strike plans for Libyan military targets since early January. The independent planning effort, coordinated by Commander-in-Chief, European Command (CINCEUR), updated existing concept plans and laid the groundwork for the

ELDORADO CANYON strike to come in April. As yet, preemptive strikes were not approved for fear of both negative international reaction and the further endangerment of Americans.<sup>15</sup>

Concurrent with military planning, economic and political actions against Libya were intensified. In early January 1986, Reagan ordered the end of virtually all trade with Libya, and froze Libyan assets in U.S. banks. As in the past the President sought similar actions from allies, but again, no unified coalition emerged.

#### Development of the Military Response

CJCS tasked CINCEUR to plan a phased FON operation off the coast of Libya, beginning with two carrier battle groups. The stated military objective was to demonstrate U.S. resolve to exercise freedom of navigation in the Gulf of Sidra.<sup>16</sup> A phased variation of the ongoing FON program was developed under the code name ATTAIN DOCUMENT. Successive phases of the operation would move fighters and anti-air warfare (AAW) ships further into the Gulf of Sidra, increasingly exerting pressure on Qaddafi while gauging Libyan military reaction. A final phase, if executed by the NCA, would send forces below Qaddafi's declared "line of death," or the 32-30 degree parallel, in a direct challenge to his territorial sea claim.

Rules of engagement (ROE) for the entire series were to fire only in response to a hostile act or a clear display of

hostile intent. In the final phase, the task force commander would be authorized to execute a contingency plan code-named PRAIRIE FIRE in response to any hostile act.<sup>17</sup> The plan authorized proportional retaliatory strikes against any Libyan ships, aircraft, or shore sites in a position to threaten the force.

#### Operation ATTAIN DOCUMENT

Phase one of the FON operation commenced on 26 January following the NCA's execute authorization. The operational objective was to test Libyan military agility by operating ships and aircraft within the immense Tripoli flight information region (FIR), which Qaddafi considered an air defense zone. The two carriers, U.S.S. Coral Sea and U.S.S. Saratoga, steamed above the FIR while their fighters flew combat air patrol (CAP) missions within. CAP stations were maintained round-the-clock, screening the carriers as well as surface ships operating in international waters below the FIR.

The Libyan Arab Air Force (LAAF) responded on the first day of the challenge, but Libyan interceptors returned to base after U.S. fighters easily took up firing positions on their sterns. Though the LAAF pilots may have merely been trying to drag their American counterparts south into Libyan surface-to-air missile (SAM) engagement zones, the U.S. pilots found their airmanship weak when engaged.<sup>18</sup> On

January 30th, after a limited Libyan response of only 14 sorties, Task Force 60 withdrew to the north in preparation for ATTAIN DOCUMENT II.

The objective of the operation's second phase was to push deeper into the FIR, testing Qaddafi's response and stressing Libyan air defenses. U.S. Navy fighters moved into CAP stations in the Tripoli FIR on 12 February. This time the reaction was vigorous--Qaddafi's interceptors flew in excess of 150 sorties and maneuvered more aggressively. While no shots were fired, the task force gathered valuable intelligence on the Libyan air defense system and potential combat ability of LAAF pilots. The two carrier battle force disengaged on 15 February to prepare for the final phase of ATTAIN DOCUMENT.

On 14 March President Reagan approved execution of the third phase of the operation which would directly challenge Qaddafi's claim to the Gulf of Sidra by crossing the "line of death." The U.S.S. America battle group, scheduled relief for Saratoga, arrived on station in mid-March to augment the battle force with a third carrier. Task Force 60, now consisting of over 25 combatant ships, 250 aircraft, and 27,000 personnel, steamed toward Libya on the 23rd of March.

Late on the 23rd Navy aircraft penetrated the line of death. Early the next day a three-ship surface action group

(SAG) steamed into the disputed waters, covered by CAP. Within two hours, the long anticipated Libyan response came via two SA-5 SAMs launched at aircraft filling the southernmost CAP stations--the fighters descended to the deck and easily evaded the missiles.<sup>19</sup> Operation PRAIRIE FIRE was now in effect. All Libyan platforms that maneuvered into international waters and approached the force would be considered hostile.

The first Libyan ship attacked was a La Combattante-class missile patrol boat, detected cruising towards the SAG. It was quickly taken out of action by two air-launched Harpoon cruise missiles. Two Saratoga A-7s then replied to the earlier SAM attack, firing HARM anti-radiation missiles at the SA-5 sites. A follow-up attack silenced the sites for the remainder of the operation. During the course of the night two Nanuchka-class missile boats were attacked by A-6s as they approached the task force--both were severely damaged.

The SAG continued to steam below the line of death for another two days, unchallenged by Qaddafi. The NCA decided the task force should withdraw on March 27th, three days ahead of schedule, considering the political and military objectives of the operation accomplished.<sup>20</sup> In the brief confrontation, U.S. forces suffered no damage or casualties while forcefully demonstrating both American resolve, and nonacceptance of Libya's claim to the Gulf of Sidra.



Qaddafi's public response to the humiliating Sidra defeat was predictable. He claimed the LAAF shot down three U.S. fighters and that none of his patrol boats had been hit, while making emotional calls for an Arab holy war against the United States.<sup>21</sup> More significantly, he immediately issued directives for renewed terrorist attacks against Americans. Qaddafi's revenge would come 10 days later with the death of two U.S. soldiers, and the wounding of some 70 others, in the La Belle Disotheque bombing in West Berlin.

#### Operation ELDORADO CANYON

The day after the La Belle bombing President Reagan received what he felt was needed to politically justify a punitive strike against Qaddafi--National Security Agency intercepts directly implicated Libya in the La Belle attack. On 9 April Reagan set the ELDORADO CANYON strike plan in motion, reserving final authority to execute the mission.<sup>22</sup> The only remaining detail to be worked out was final selection of targets.

Strategic objectives of the operation would have both political and military elements. The political goal was not solely to punish Qaddafi for the Berlin bombing, but to also preempt future attacks by demonstrating U.S. resolve in a very decisive way.<sup>23</sup> Militarily, the raid would strike a direct blow against Libya's terrorist sponsorship capability

by attacking barracks, training facilities, headquarters, and aircraft that were used for terrorist support. Operational goals would include attrition of the Libyan air defense network and destruction of specific military targets at Tripoli and Benghazi.<sup>24</sup>

CINCEUR gave USAFE responsibility for targets to be struck in the Tripoli area--COMSIXTHFLT would cover targets in Benghazi using the two carrier air wings, and would also be in tactical command of the operation. ROE for the strike aircraft was strict to both minimize collateral damage and to protect the pilots. Bombs would not be dropped unless weapons systems were fully operational and navigation data was certain, and pilots were forbidden to revisit any targets.

The strike, initially scheduled for 12 April, was delayed until 2:00 AM local on the fourteenth to allow operational commanders' staffs to finalize targeteering.<sup>25</sup> Air Force F-111s based in England would hit terrorism-related targets in Tripoli, including Aziziya Barracks, considered the primary command and control center for Libya's international terrorism network, Tripoli Military Airfield where planes used to transport terrorists were based, and the Sidi Bilal terrorist training facility. Navy A-6s would strike terrorist facilities to the east in Benghazi, including the Jamahiriya Barracks, confirmed terrorist

training facility, and Benina airfield, home base to MiG-23 Floggers as well as key nodes of the Libyan air defense system. Carrier-based F/A-18s, F-14s, and A-7s were tasked to provide SAM suppression and fighter support for both the Air Force and Navy strike packages.

Late afternoon on 14 April Coral Sea made a high-speed run through the Straits of Messina toward her strike launch position, evading a Soviet destroyer poised to gather intelligence on the carrier's operations.<sup>26</sup> As Coral Sea joined America in the central Mediterranean, eighteen F-111s from Lakenheath AFB flew down the coast of the Iberian Peninsula toward the Straits of Gibraltar--a last minute attempt by the State Department to obtain overflight rights from France had failed, roughly doubling the F-111s' 3000 mile round trip to 6000 miles.<sup>27</sup> Nevertheless, the Navy and Air Force strike packages were over their targets within seconds of the designated "time on top" of 2:00 am, and had all egressed back over water within 12 minutes.

The raid achieved tactical if not strategic surprise--during ingress the pilots noted with some relief that their targets were not blacked out. This, combined with the effective suppression mission and the strict ROE, enabled all but one of the more than 30 strike aircraft to egress safely. An F-111 was lost shortly before crossing the Libyan coastline enroute to its target.

Military, the raid achieved mixed results. The restrictive ROE prevented four of the nine F-111s slated for Aziziyah Barracks from deploying their weapons--a fifth plane reported dropping 'long and another had crashed near the coast.<sup>28</sup> The sections assigned to the Sidi Bilal facility and Tripoli airfield had better luck--only one plane aborted and the remaining eight reported 72 hits.

The Navy strikes to the east in Benghazi appeared more successful. Six of eight A-6s allocated to Benina airfield reached their targets, destroying several MiGs, helicopters, and transport planes, and six of seven A-6s planned for the Jamahiriyah Barracks missed most of the complex, but fortuitously destroyed four MiGs in a nearby warehouse. The A-7s and F/A-18s assigned the SAM suppression mission severely damaged the Libyan air defense network with HARM and SHRIKE missiles.<sup>29</sup>

As the last of the Navy's planes recovered and the F-111s began their long flight back to England, President Reagan addressed the nation. Knowing it was essential to have the support of the American people for this and any future military action against Qaddafi, Reagan cited irrefutable evidence linking Libya to both the La Belle incident and intercepted plans for future attacks, and warned he might strike again.<sup>30</sup> Within days polls showed that an nearly 80% of Americans approved of the military's strike

against Libya. Not surprisingly, international reaction was overwhelmingly negative and reflected the perpetual inability to build a coalition against Qaddafi. Predictably, Great Britain was the only European nation to openly support the strike.

Libya's immediate reaction to the U.S. attack was uncharacteristically muted. The only military response came on 15 April with an impotent Scud missile salvo against a U.S. Coast Guard station on Italy's Lampedusa Island. The two Scud-Bs dropped harmlessly into the sea short of their intended target. Qaddafi disappeared into the Libyan desert in the aftermath of the attack--it was reported he had been staying at the Aziziyah compound the night of the strike, and was severely shaken if not injured by the American bombs. While Qaddafi laid low his propaganda machine called for continued attacks against Americans everywhere, and declared victory over U.S. aggression.<sup>31</sup>

## CHAPTER IV

### OPERATIONAL ART IN THE LIBYAN CAMPAIGN

#### The Libyan Operations and the Spectrum of Conflict

The U.S. military's contingency operations against Libya occurred at the low end of a spectrum of conflict that progresses ultimately to high intensity, or conventional war. There has been much debate concerning the term "low intensity conflict" and its accuracy in describing conditions that are often very violent. The current Joint Chiefs of Staff definition describes low intensity conflict as:

"Political-military confrontation between contending states or groups below conventional war and above the routine, peaceful competition among states. It frequently involves protracted struggles of competing principles and ideologies. Low intensity conflict ranges from subversion to the use of armed force. It is waged by a combination of means employing political, economic, informational, and military instruments. Low intensity conflicts are often localized, generally in the Third World, but contain regional and global security implications." (JCS Pub 1-02)

Low intensity conflict occurs in a unique and ambiguous environment between peace and war.<sup>32</sup> In conventional war the political, diplomatic/informational, and economic elements of national power support the military instrument, which acts in direct support of achievement of national objectives. In low intensity conflict, military force generally assumes an indirect or supporting role in the achievement of national aims, while the political element of power moves to the

forefront.<sup>33</sup> The challenge at all levels of command in low intensity conflict is to understand and maintain proper balance of the sources of national power in an effort to prevent escalation to conventional war and, ideally, affect a return to routine peacetime competition and stability.

Low intensity conflict (LIC) includes four major categories of military activities: insurgency and counterinsurgency operations, peacekeeping operations, combatting terrorism, and peacetime contingencies.<sup>34</sup> A LIC operation can occur in more than one of these areas. U.S. military actions against Libya in 1986 sought to counter terrorism through peacetime contingency operations, including shows of force and punitive and preemptive strikes. The counter-terrorist nature of the missions assigned to conventional forces in the ATTAIN DOCUMENT series made the LIC operation even more unique--current joint doctrine envisions using Special Operations Forces (SOF) for most counter-terrorist contingency operations.<sup>35</sup>

#### Ends and Means of Combatting Terrorism

Terrorist acts against American citizens and interests are counter to national security objectives of the United States, which include protection of the country's people and institutions.<sup>36</sup> In cases where a state, such as Libya, is directly or indirectly supporting such activity, national and theater strategies call for efforts to curtail the

state's sponsorship of the attacks and attempts to bring those responsible to justice. Few international terrorist organizations operate without at least indirect logistical support of some foreign government, and in cases where such assistance can be proven, the United States must be prepared to take action with allies, or unilaterally if necessary, against such governments.

America's low intensity conflict with Libya in the eighties ultimately sought these ends through synchronization of all four instruments of national power. Military force played a supporting role throughout, but was not applied directly until April 1986 after non-military means had been exhausted. The gradual escalation of the conflict with Libya, from economic and diplomatic sanctions to air strikes, reflects the characteristic "last resort" use of direct military action in the LIC environment. This dominance of the political element, and correlating restrained use of military force, are primary characteristics of LIC and must be understood by operational level commanders.<sup>37</sup>

#### The Concept of Operational Art in LIC

Operational art is the technique of employing military forces to accomplish strategic or major operational objectives in a military theater through the preparation, planning, conduct, and sustainment of major operations and campaigns.<sup>38</sup> It is the essential process that translates



strategic objectives into operations and, ultimately, tactical action. The term evokes the element of uncertainty in campaign outcomes which resists a purely scientific approach, and requires military commanders to think abstractly when envisioning future operations. Operational art pertains all across the spectrum of conflict though, as will be shown, its application at the low end is complicated by primacy of the political element.

Some theorists argue the military actions against Libya were so political in nature that operational art, or operational level thinking, was inapplicable because of a direct juxtaposition of the strategic and tactical levels of war--that the actions were so strategic the operational level commanders, CINCEUR and COMSIXTHFLT, were virtual spectators. This presumption ignores the relevance of campaign planning in the low intensity conflict environment. Across the operational continuum, campaign plans are developed when a series of related military operations are required to achieve strategic or operational objectives. Because conditions that exist in the LIC environment cannot be described in military terms alone, campaigns must be orchestrated and synchronized with the political, informational, and economic elements of power.<sup>39</sup>

ATTAIN DOCUMENT and ELDORADO CANYON, a related series of major operations working in concert with non-military

efforts, were designed to achieve both operational and strategic ends. Though in LIC the campaign concept must be broadened to include non-military efforts, peacetime contingency operations such as those with Libya must still be planned and coordinated by operational level commanders and their staffs.<sup>40</sup>

#### Operational Art in the Campaign Against Libya

Campaign planning in low intensity conflict involves the same initial logic process used in preparation for conventional war. Among many other critical considerations in developing the campaign, operational art requires the military commander to answer four basic but essential questions:<sup>41</sup>

- (1) What final military condition or end state represents achievement of the strategic objective?
- (2) What sequence of operations or actions will produce the desired final condition?
- (3) How should forces and resources be employed to support the operations?
- (4) What is the likely cost or risk to own forces in performing the sequence of operations or actions?

In planning the Gulf of Sidra operations both CINCEUR, at the upper end of the operational level, and COMSIXTHFLT, at the lower end, had to answer each of these questions. Addressing the first required thorough understanding of national and theater military objectives for the operations, and more

important, the dominant political element of those objectives.

The national strategic objective of the Gulf of Sidra operations was to deter further Libyan-supported terrorism against Americans through a show of force.<sup>42</sup> For reasons of legitimacy the exercise was publicly portrayed solely as a FON operation, the latest in the series off Libya that had begun in 1981. But the exercises had always been more than just a challenge of territorial sea claims. They had come to represent the conventional military element in the LIC campaign against Qaddafi--and in context of the events of late 1985, it was obvious that this FON exercise had great potential for hostile action. Despite some lack of clarity in the political forum concerning the operation's intent, CINCEUR and COMSIXTHFLT recognized that their objective was to purposefully conduct FON operations, while remaining prepared to execute contingencies either in self-defense, or in response to new terrorist attacks against American interests.<sup>43</sup>

The second question commanders faced required identification of Libyan centers of gravity--the sources of power or strength that their sequence of operations should be oriented on. At the strategic level, the United States was targeting Qaddafi's will or resolve to continue supporting terrorism, even his legitimacy as an "Arab leader." At the

operational level in LIC, enemy centers of gravity tend away from the physical towards the abstract.<sup>44</sup> The phased freedom of navigation exercise concentrated on Libyan air and naval forces' legitimacy, as an extension of Qaddafi's. The Libyan leader had vowed his military would sink the Sixth Fleet and turn the Mediterranean into "a sea of blood"--the Sixth Fleet had to demonstrate its ability to operate unmolested in international waters, and respond decisively to any military challenge. The phasing of the operation demonstrated patience and determination over a three month period, and mirrored American perseverance in the protracted LIC struggle against Libya. The phasing also enhanced adaptability and flexibility of response--important aspects considering the dynamic, political nature of the campaign against Qaddafi.

CINCEUR and COMSIXTHFLT had to allocate and task forces for the operations. Though often in LIC categories such as insurgency/counterinsurgency and peacekeeping U.S. forces are used discretely, or the application of force is limited, the unique nature of the Libyan contingency dictated the use of a large, conventional force. First, the military was being used in a high visibility, politically charged show of force. This necessitated employment of something greater for the FON operation than the usual one carrier battle group. Second, operational commanders knew a clash with Libya was probable. Since U.S. forces would be operating within striking range of

virtually all Libyan combat air and naval craft, they not only required adequate defensive capability, but the flexibility and firepower to rapidly shift to the offensive in response to either hostile action, or a strike contingency execute order.<sup>45</sup>

For ELDORADO CANYON, the decision was made to employ a joint strike force of both Navy carrier-based A-6s and USAF F-111s. The basis of that decision has been vigorously debated since the day after the strike. Some critics have argued that the USAF participation was purely political--that the excessive distance from England to Tripoli made their use unsound. Others maintain that the additional combat power the F-111s offered was critical to the success of the mission. Though the issue may never be resolved, it appears that CINCEUR simply employed the most capable combination of medium attack assets he had available in theater.

Finally, assessment of risks to U.S. forces was conducted by COMSIXTHFLT for both the ATTAIN DOCUMENT series and for ELDORADO CANYON. The results of planning meetings with subordinate staffs formed the basis for decisions on task force organization, command and control structures, and supplemental ROE to be requested of JCS. The challenge of safely employing the massive U.S. task force was simplified by maintaining individual carrier battle group task organization, and placing them all under the umbrella of

Commander, Task Force 60's command.<sup>46</sup> COMSIXTHFLT then assumed tactical control of Task Force 60 and supporting USAFE assets. Additionally, supplemental ROE granted to unit commanders gave them the flexibility needed to protect their forces and respond proportionally to any Libyan aggression.

The strict ROE for the ELDORADO CANYON aircraft was designed to protect both American pilots and Libyan civilians. Though the ROE was criticized for limiting the impact of the strike, the fact that both U.S. and Libyan strategic centers of gravity centered on legitimacy justified exceptional measures taken to prevent collateral damage, as well as the downing or capture of American pilots.

Operational art also requires commanders to apply recognized principles of war in the planning and execution of campaigns and operations. Though these principles--objective, offensive, mass, economy of force, maneuver, unity of command, security, surprise, and simplicity--can apply in low intensity conflict, more often other unique concepts or imperatives dominate LIC plans and operations. The importance of special imperatives is recognized in JCS Pub 3-07, Doctrine for Joint Operations in Low Intensity Conflict (Test Pub), which lists the following six: primacy of the political element, adaptability or flexibility, legitimacy, perseverance, restricted use of force, and unity of effort. The relevance of the first five to the Libyan

campaign has already been examined--unity of effort in LIC parallels the principle of unity of command in conventional war, and probably presents the greatest challenge to operational level commanders.

The low intensity conflict environment demands that unity of effort be examined beyond the purely military context.<sup>47</sup> Because the campaign concept in LIC encompasses political, diplomatic, and economic instruments as well as that of the military, unity of effort requires coordination and cooperation among many civil and defense agencies. The State Department, the Central Intelligence Agency, the National Security Agency, the Defense Intelligence Agency, and many other organizations supported the campaign against Libya. While the operational level commanders did not have control of these agencies, they had to coordinate activities with them in pursuing a common objective.

Low intensity conflict imperatives apply at all levels of planning and execution, and challenge operational commanders in particular to understand the unique nature of LIC and convey it to their forces. COMSIXTHFLT met face-to-face with subordinate commanders during both preparation and execution of the Libyan operations to ensure their thorough understanding of operational objectives and ROE.<sup>48</sup> He promoted unity effort by clearly articulating his vision of success down the chain of command, and by emphasizing that

the operation was in support of non-military initiatives being undertaken.

#### Effectiveness of the Campaign

The long-term effect of the military operations against Libya is still being debated. The tactical and operational objectives of ATTAIN DOCUMENT/PRAIRIE FIRE were achieved--ships and aircraft of Task Force 60 demonstrated American resolve to operate in the Gulf of Sidra, while decisively responding to Qaddafi's decision to engage the U.S. force. The strategic objective was not attained--Libya reciprocated with another terrorist attack against Americans just 10 days later.

ELDORADO CANYON, the first direct application of military force against Libyan-sponsored terrorism, only partially achieved its objectives at all three levels of war. Tactically, the bombing caused extensive damage but not all intended targets were hit, and two American pilots were lost. Operationally, the strike did pose a blow to both the confidence and credibility of Qaddafi's armed forces by destroying a significant amount of military hardware, but the attack did not severely degrade Libya's physical ability to support terrorism.

The effectiveness of ELDORADO CANYON at the strategic level is more difficult to assess. The initially disappointing bomb damage assessment was quickly forgotten



as the NCA viewed F-111 infrared videotapes of targets in Tripoli being hit.<sup>49</sup> The vivid footage was immediately released to the press, and served the political instrument by dramatizing America's strike against terrorism. But while there was a lull in terrorist activity for several months after the air strike, the later half of 1986 saw several Americans killed or wounded in terrorist attacks in the Middle East.

Still, the attacks were now coming less often. There was a decline of more than 25% in incidents directed at U.S. targets from 1986 to 1987, and there was a nearly 80% drop in American fatalities from 1985 to 1987.<sup>50</sup> Perhaps more important, Muammar Qaddafi gradually faded from center stage, his dream of leading a pan-Arab federation ruined after failing to deliver on promises to bloody the U.S. military.

## CHAPTER V

### CONCLUSIONS

The military action against Libya came after more than a decade of persistent diplomatic and economic sanctions to stop Qaddafi's military adventurism and support of terrorism. The Gulf of Sidra operations were one major phase of a protracted campaign fought in the political arena of low intensity conflict. The operations were unique in their use of major conventional forces in a decisive way to counter state-supported terrorism. Whether the actions had the desired effect on Libya may never be known, but there was a significant drop in terrorist attacks against Americans in the following months, and Qaddafi's credibility in the Arab world has suffered.

Operational art is essential in low intensity conflict but demands planning from a different perspective than that in conventional war. In LIC, the primacy of the political instrument at the strategic, operational, and tactical levels of war challenges military commanders to think in terms of indirect vice direct use of force. That is, military force complements other instruments of power, and will likely be held in reserve until political, diplomatic, and economic means have been exhausted.

The EUCOM and Sixth Fleet staffs employed aspects of operational art in the LIC environment in developing the

ATTAIN DOCUMENT and ELDORADO CANYON plans. Despite high-level guidance concerning target selection and timing of major phases of the operations, they were able to plan and execute a series of military actions that balanced strategic imperatives with the safety of the force. The commanders understood the sensitive political nature of the mission, both with respect to Libya and to allies in theater, and cooperated effectively with other U.S. agencies.<sup>51</sup>

It is possible the 1986 Libyan scenario will never be duplicated. The future use of conventional force to counter terrorism is likely only when clear evidence of state support of specific attacks exists, and it is expected that the international community will continue to hesitate to support U.S. counter-attacks. Still, the shift in the national military strategy toward lesser regional contingencies and low intensity conflict challenges military commanders at all levels of war to fully grasp the role of operational art in LIC. Accordingly, it is recommended that the final draft of Doctrine for Joint Operations in Low Intensity Conflict (JCS Pub 3-07), and related joint publications, specifically address the applicability and importance of operational art in the LIC environment.

Summary of U.S. Operations Against Libya  
November, 1985 - April, 1986\*

Nov. 23, 1985 -- Abu Nidal terrorists hijack Egypt Air flight to Malta. Sixty killed including two Americans.

Dec. 27 -- Abu Nidal terrorists simultaneously attack Rome and Vienna Airports. Five Americans killed.

Jan. 7, 1986 -- President Reagan orders all U.S. citizens to leave Libya and severs all trade.

Jan. 14 -- Libyan MiG-25s intercept U.S. EA-3B flying in international airspace.

Jan. 21 -- President Reagan approves initiation of Gulf of Sidra FON operations.

Jan. 26 -- ATTAIN DOCUMENT phase I commences.

Jan. 30 -- ATTAIN DOCUMENT phase I concludes.

Feb. 12 -- ATTAIN DOCUMENT phase II commences.

Feb. 15 -- ATTAIN DOCUMENT phase II concludes.

Mar. 14 -- President Reagan approves crossing of "line of death" for next phase of ATTAIN DOCUMENT.

Mar. 23 -- ATTAIN DOCUMENT phase III commences.

Mar. 24 -- Surface Action Group crosses 32-30 degrees.

-- Libya fires SA-5 missiles at U.S. fighters flying in international airspace.

Mar. 24-25 -- PRAIRIE FIRE contingency executed.

Mar. 27 -- ATTAIN DOCUMENT/PRAIRIE FIRE concludes.

Apr. 5 -- La Belle Disco bombing kills one American soldier and mortally wounds a second.

Apr. 6 -- NCA briefed on Libyan involvement in the La Belle bombing.

Apr. 9 -- President Reagan authorizes execution of ELDORADO CANYON

Apr. 15 -- Joint Navy and USAF force strikes targets in Tripoli and Benghazi.

-- Libya fires two Scud-B missiles at U.S. Coast Guard station on Lampedusa Island.

Apr. 18 -- Task Force 60 withdraws from central Mediterranean.

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\*Daniel P. Bolger, Americans at War: 1975-1986 -- An Era of Violent Peace (Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 1988), p. 435.

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